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Mexicans File Protest Against Press Report On Leader's Finances

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MEXICO CITY, May 28—President Miguel de la Madrid's first official visit to Washington two weeks ago went just as his advisers had envisioned, with the Mexican leader calmly confronting President Reagan on Central American policy differences and articulately making the case to Congress for Third World debt relief.

But overshadowing the local media coverage of de la Madrid's diplomatic efforts was the May 15 publication by syndicated columnist Jack Anderson of allegations that Mexico's president had funneled "a minimum of \$162 million" to a secret foreign bank account.

Infuriated that the column appeared in Washington—including in The Washington Post—on the morning that de la Madrid began his round of appointments there, Mexican officials took the highly unusual step of filing a diplomatic protest—the first time in memory that Mexico has lodged a formal complaint about a foreign press report. Noting that Anderson had attributed his information to "a high-level administration source" and "another source with access to CIA and National Security Agency data," the Mexicans demanded in a note to the State Department that the U.S. government deny the existence of this alleged data.

State swiftly complied, although in language some U.S. diplomats here said should have been stronger and more specific.

"The U.S. government applauds de la Madrid's commitment to addressing the issue of honesty in government," read the State Department's reply. "All information available to all United States government agencies leads us to the firm conclusion that de la Madrid has set both a high personal and official standard in keeping with this commitment."

Mexican officials and U.S. diplomats here suggested the item was fabricated and was planted by opponents of Mexico's foreign policy, with candidates ranging from low-level National Security Agency aides to senior administration or military officials. Officials here had expressed concern before the trip that the Reagan administration would use the presidential visit to pressure for a shift in Mexico's Central American stance.

Anderson said in a telephone interview that "we don't invent figures," adding that the information in his column "came from actual bank transfers," monitored by intelligence agencies.

But Mexican sensitivity to the report also focused on the impact it would have at home.

"We didn't care about U.S. public opinion, but we were worried about what people in Mexico would think," one high-level presidential adviser later remarked.

De la Madrid entered office on an anticorruption platform, and his own reputation for personal probity remains his administration's strongest political asset. Even most of the president's political opponents say they believe his personal financial management has been scrupulously correct. Yet de la Madrid's staff, afraid that their compatriots are now inclined to believe the worst about their leaders' ethics, say they were concerned that the source of the report cited here—the U.S. press, and specifically its appearance in The Washington Post—would tend to validate the allegation in the eyes of many Mexicans.

The only Mexico City daily to reproduce Anderson's specific charges was the left-liberal *Unomásuno*. This show of press restraint, although it was mostly an exercise in self-censorship, was not without official encouragement. "At least we managed to contain the damage," one administration source said.

It was not until after de la Madrid's return two days later—when the presidential press office issued a sternly worded denial of the charges and a report of the diplomatic note exchange—that Mexico's major newspapers referred directly to Anderson's accusations, and then by quoting the presidential communique, which stated that de la Madrid "has no bank account in any foreign country and has never transferred money out of Mexico."